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AUTHOR Marchino, Lois A.
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ABSTRACT

The lesbian detective of current fiction may be single, but she is not alone; she has a lover. In varying degrees of realism and fantasy, sexuality is part of her character. While some writers in the field argue that romances involving the protagonists of feminist detective fiction distract from the plot, these critics themselves sometimes break their own rules. Lesbian novels focus on many sex-related concerns; the sleuth is often drawn into the action because a friend or lover needs help, and lovers often work together to combat prejudice. In theory, and in the practice of the best writers, sexuality is not only a major component of characterization but also a statement of humanitarian values and lesbian feminism. The question then is not how sexy the lesbian detective novel is, but how well it is written and integrated. These novels present positive views of women loving women and provide positive models validating various choices for women. (A 22-item bibliography of lesbian mystery novels is attached.) (SG)

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Transforming the Detective Novel:

Sex and the Single Sleuth

Lois A. Marchino

The dyke detective in current fiction may be single, but unlike the Miss Marples and Miss Silvers of traditional female detection, the lesbian sleuth is not alone, not a loner; she has a lover. Or at least she has had one, or wants one, or has more than one, or whatever. And whatever her particular love relationship or celibacy at the moment, she is herself a lover; no matter how independently she must investigate or what solitary risks she must take either in love or in solving the crime, she cares for other women, she identifies with other women, she has lesbian friends. In varying degrees of realism and fantasy, sexuality is part of her character.

The same trend toward increased sexual activity is seen, though to a lesser extent, in the current heterosexual feminist sleuths: Sara Paretsky's V.I.Warshawski, tough Chicago P.I. that she is, cheerfully sleeps with men when she occasionally chooses, as do Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhouse, and most other single women protagonists in detective fiction. As Maureen Reddy says in Sisters in Crime (1988), it "seems almost mandatory now that crime novels include a love interest," with an entire subgenre called mystery romances (21).

This is a rather disturbing development to readers who prefer fewer distractions in the mystery plot, and feminist detective writers Dorothy Sayers and P.D. James have argued that romances mar the perfection of the form, endangering both its unity as a novel and undermining the quality of the detection (Reddy, 4, 21; Craig and Cadogan, 188; P.D.James commentary on PBS Mystery series, 1988). But

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even they sometimes break their own rules, and Sayers subtitled Busman's Honeymoon, the novel in which Harriet Vane finally marries Lord Peter Wimsey, "A love story with detective interruptions" Many of the current lesbian detective novels could use the same subtitle.

With all the current emphasis on sexuality, we might well consider Bobbie Ann Mason's analysis of Nancy Drew in her excellent study The Girl Sleuth (1975). Nancy Drew is "the most popular girl detective in the world" (49), and, I might add, by far the most widely cited sleuth in women's crime novels. Mason reminds us that Nancy Drew existed in a world which affirmed "a double standard for female sexuality: attention to beauty and clamps on virginity" (65). In the original series, those famous blue hardbacks starting in 1929, Nancy solved more than fifty mysteries, most of them, as Mason wryly notes, "in the summer of her eighteenth year" (49). Nancy is, Mason says, "an eternal girl, a stage which is a false ideal for women of our time" (75). The mysteries, Mason concludes, "are a substitute for sex, since sex is the greatest mystery of all for adolescents" (63).

The widespread focus on sex in current detective novels suggests that sex is a mystery not only to adolescents. But dyke detectives have certainly grown beyond being girl sleuths, and the ideals which they represent are suggested as much by their romantic attachments as by their solving the crime. As Nichols and Thompson say in Silk Stalkings: When Women Write of Murder (1988), women writers tend "to focus less on the actual crime and more on the relationships of the characters involved with the case" (xv). Nichols and Thompson conclude: "Human nature in all its permutations is the foundation of the mystery metaphor" (xvi).

In discussing lesbian fiction--female characters who are linked by their shared lesbianism--Maureen Reddy notes that this distinctive subgenre includes "coming out stories and romances, with the love interest frequently taking center stage, shifting the mystery proper to the wings" (16). It is no coincidence that the lesbian detective novel is, as Reddy says, "the one that most directly challenges generic conventions by making explicit the social critique that is more covert in most other crime novels" and that "Lesbian crime novels more often than other women's mysteries address issues of race and class as well, illuminating the conjunction of sex, race, and class oppression" (16).

The novels focus on many sex-related concerns, such as Barbara Wilson's The Dog Collar Murders, which opens with a women's conference where s & m is a hot topic, and the entire novel revolves around attitudes toward problematic role-playing and sexual practices. This is one of the few works that mentions AIDS (Double Daughter; Murder at the Nightwood Bar, After Delores). The lesbian sleuth is most frequently drawn into the action because a friend needs help, and often she risks her life in a literal rescue of her lover, or sometimes another woman rescues her (Fatal Reunion, Lessons in Murder, Stoner McTavish, Something Shady, Gray Magic, Osten's Bay, etc.). Professionals typically have a special connection to the case because the victim is a lesbian or because they fall in love with their client (The Burnton Widows, Burning, She Came Too Late, Angel Dance, The Monarchs Are Flying, etc.) Lovers face self-doubts and misunderstandings, but they work together to combat social prejudice. They encounter rape, incest, pornography, and other forms of women's

oppression worldwide.

In theory then, and in the practice of the best writers, sexuality is not only a major component of characterization but also a statement of humanitarian values and a lesbian feminist revisioning subtly or overtly reflected in the story line. A good example here is Valerie Miner's Murder in the English Department (1982), in which Professor Nan Weaver passionately defends women's rights and goes to jail rather than disclose the identity of the graduate student she knows has killed in self defense against a rapist. Once the student learns Nan has been arrested, she admits her involvement to free her. Miner does all this without sex scenes; she reminds us that identification with women and women's issues goes beyond individual physical relationships: lesbianism is a state of mind, feminism an attitude that sees the on-going process of development of self always in relation to the rights of others. In the Bildungsroman(e) aspects of the lesbian novel, the female hero assumes her role in the wider world, challenging the public/private dichotomy (Reddy, 24).

Unfortunately, as in life, not all the women characters in crime fiction are as honorable as Nan Weaver and the other protagonists; a female is sometimes the criminal, the murderer, the bad guy. Breaking our expectations of the conventions, the protagonist cannot even always exempt her sexual partners from possible suspicion. As Craig and Cadogan point out in The Lady Investigates (1981), the traditional detective was quintessentially disinterested, and "It is a new departure for the woman detective to sleep with a person who may be implicated in the curious events which make up the story" (236). To cite one distressing example, Claire McNab's Detective Inspector Carol

Ashton (Fatal Reunion, 1989), has sex with an ex-lover whom she later discovers to be the double murderer. In the ultimate betrayal, the former lover attempts to murder Carol too. But here also the complications of love and sex relationships are intertwined with the plot, and the author reveals a world we recognize, however begrudgingly.

Including explicit scenes of love-making and sensuality in lesbian fiction serves many purposes, and it is difficult to assess which purpose is in the foreground of the message sent or even the message received. Perhaps my next project should be to contact as many of the authors as possible and ask them why they include love and sex scenes. But among the reading audience too it is difficult to decide which are the dominant reactions to these passages. Indeed, the reaction varies from one text to another, or from the first to the second or third reading of one specific text. Perhaps it is this variety of views about love and sex that is important, including the variety of approaches to writing about sex: something for everyone.

For variety there certainly is, in this overlapping of detective and romance genres, in this present assumption that readers should know about the detective's love life. Or perhaps it is the assumption by writers and publishers that sex sells. One suspects one can almost hear Barbara Grier at Naiad Press telling authors their manuscripts will be accepted if they throw in a few torrid sex scenes. And yes, even Nancy Drew has discovered sex and romance, or at least kissing and romance. The series called The Nancy Drew Files, which first appeared three years ago, features titillating covers and inside (in a much lowered vocabulary level and a much simplified plot) Nancy dates

and kisses and displays a jealous streak (Hirsch, 47). The Fall, 1987, Common Lives/Lesbian Lives quarterly features a clever update of Nancy Drew similar to versions many lesbians have long imagined: Nancy has married Ned, but she regrets it, and after George and Bess reveal their lesbian relationship and even faithful housekeeper Hannah acknowledges her long-term affair with a friend named Rosie, Nancy solves the mystery of why she hasn't enjoyed life as Mrs. Ned Nickerson. She promptly moves in with George and Bess, and in the final scene she buys a king-sized bed (19).

The question then is not so much how sexy is the contemporary lesbian detective novel, but how well is it written and how well are the scenes integrated into the novel as a whole. In about a fourth of the current novels the sex scenes are, frankly, pretty sleazy. Maureen Reddy reminds us that "the feminist crime novel is still in its youth, and so aesthetic judgments seem premature" (17), but she admits that some of the scenes seem gratuitous, adolescent, artificial, and annoying (157). Of Sarah Dreher's Stoner McTavish series, for example, Reddy comments on the artificially heightened language which sounds like a Harlequin romance. She cites a representative passage from Something Shady: Gwen casually touches Stoner on the wrist and "the touch traveled up her arm, through her body, and out the soles of her feet. When she got up, she knew, there would be charred spots on the floor" (157). Reddy comments, "A little of this goes a very long way" (157).

One could quote other passages, a contest of trashy sex scenes where "her hot wet center" closes around fingers "in fluttering spasms" (The Always Anonymous Beast, 154). These novels seem geared

to an unsophistical audience far removed from the linguistic subtleties and emotional power of writers such as Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, or Mary Daly, or from stylish detective novelists such as Amanda Cross, P.D. James, or Sara Paretsky. These dime pulp novels now cost $8.95, but we continue to buy them if we're hooked on dyke detectives, and the cross-over romance readers buy them too.

Literary tastes and sensibilities vary, and fortunately authors such as Barbara Wilson, Dolores Klaich, and Katherine Forrest more skillfully integrate the loving with the sleuthing and are somewhat more senitive in depicting love scenes. Writing directly about sex has been largely taboo for women, and it isn't easy to create a vocabulary, style, and tone that conveys the passion and joy of two women loving. In Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook (1962) writer Anna Wulf says, "Sex. The difficulty of writing about sex, for women, is that sex is best when not thought about, not analysed. Women deliberately choose not to think about technical sex. They get irratable when men talk technically, it's out of self-preservation: they want to preserve the spontaneous emotion that is essential for their satisfaction. Sex is essentially emotional for women" (214).

To put it another way, the experience of sexuality at its most intense goes beyond words; that is one of its attractions. As with any mystical illumination, it cannot be directly revealed in words, but must be represented through symbol and form. But this too can be difficult to accomplish. In the following passage from Zenobia Vole's Osten's Bay (1988), the idea is a moving one, but it is presented almost too bluntly: "Washed in silver light, she was symbol, archetype, a figure charged with meaning....Awestruck, Gail stared,

suddenly aware that she was in the presence of some ancient mystery, something that had bound women together down through the ages....Something visible, yet so potent that it frightened men and daunted weaker women. Something, she realized, that also included her" (2). Immediately after this dream Gail meets Marike Osten and is instantly wildly attracted to her. Still, the intent of the passage seems clear and kindly meant.

Indeed, all the lesbian detective novels present positive views toward women loving women. The sex scenes generally overlap with the love relationships, with strong emotional exchanges between lovers. There is little that might be called casual or exploitative sex. All the novels show the strength of supportive female friendships and provide positive models validating various choices for women.

In their satisfactions in loving women as well as in their dedication to justice in their roles as sleuths, we find the protagonists courageous, responsible, and likeable. They are our friends too. They engage in a world we recognize and share. They show us we are not alone. As Craig and Cadogan say, the woman detective embodies "two qualities often disallowed for women in the past: the power of action and practical intelligence" (246). The lesbian detective adds the power of loving women. Her loving becomes an emblem for living with compassion and hope. Her very existence challenges heterosexual assumptions and provides possibilities for change. In an ideal society there would be little need for detectives or for sexual labels, but in the current world and the world of novels, we could propose a salute: To the dyke detective--long may she live and love.

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Lois Marchino
University of Texas at El Paso
El Paso, Tx. 79968

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